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The Spiritual Form of Ancient Art and Culture - Bharatanatyam (Visual Art) Depicted Using Unique Techniques on Scratchboard (Fine Art) Medium

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ABSTRACT

The most ancient form of dance that is prevailing today is a form of classical Indian dance, Bharatanatyam. In Sanskrit (and Devanagari), Bharatanatyam means "Indian dance", is believed to have divine origin and is of the most ancient form of classical dance. Bharatanatyam is a two thousand-year-old dance form, originally practiced in the temples of ancient India. The art today remains purely devotional even today and this performing art is yet to gain awareness and interest in the western world. This dance form has various implications in improving the higher order thinking in children and provides health benefits in adults apart from cultural preservation. The current study uses scratchboard as a medium to display the artistic movements and emotions. Scratchboard, a fine art is one means by which the visual art is expressed in this current study using sharp tools, namely X-acto 11 scalpel and tattoo needles. This unique medium made up of a masonite hardboard coated with soft clay and Indian ink has been used to not only show the details of the ancient dance form and expression but also to comprehend and transcribe both visual art and fine art. It is for the first time that scratchboard medium has been innovatively used to show various textures of flower, glistening gold jewels, hand woven silk and the divine expression in the same art 'devotion'. The current study was carried out in-order to perpetuate, conserve and disseminate these classic forms of visual art and fine art.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, Devotion, Fine Art, Scratchboard, Tattoo Needles, X-Acto 11.

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1. Introduction

'Bharatanatyam' (in Sanskrit, meaning- Indian dance) has a rich language of expression, as found in 'Natyashastra', the ancient Hindu text and a detailed treatise handbook on dramatic art. *Natyashastra* is attributed to be first completely compiled between 200 BCE and 200 CE. This ancient performing art, *Bharatanatyam* is a two thousand-year-old dance form was spiritual and originally practiced in the Hindu temples of ancient India. This is a form of interpretive dance that uses facial expressions, hand gestures,

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and body movements to portray emotions and express themes is termed as 'Nritya' (Sanskrit meaning-dance justified by meaning of a song). In *nritya*, various expressions cross the dancer's face, showing different emotions. All the parts of the face may be active in displaying the emotions. Every expression, step, and symbolic hand gesture is meant to convey the mythology, expression of spiritual ideas, virtues and the essence of scriptures with movement and beauty (Coomaraswamy and Duggirala, 1917).

To date this form of dance is performed as a mark of cultural preservation among the south East Asian countries. More recent research has shown that this dance form can be used to enhance the higher order learning skills in children including the mathematical skills (Kalpana, 2015). Nonetheless, this ancient dance form has been studied and helped children with disabilities to learn effectively or develop the hyper-learning skills (Prichard and Taylor, 1981; Poursabahian, 2012). It has been speculated in the recent times that dance and art can be applied as a therapy (Meekums, 2015). Yet this performing art has been less popular in the west and its scientific implications has not been well subjugated for the benefit of the society and there seems to be a need to spread the awareness among people across the globe of this rich cultural value.

As an effort to conserve the two forms of creative arts- performing art and fine art/visual art, this present study was carried out. Herein we study the unique combination of performing art and fine art using a less explored and unique medium called the scratchboard. Scratchboard although has evolved from over a 100years from wood work to the modern-day scratchboards manufactured by Ampersand (Buda, Texas, USA) (History of Scratchboard) has been used by several artists for over 30 years for making wildlife art, animal or simply portraits due to the depth and dimensions one can achieve using this medium. A pioneering scratchboard artist late Diana Lee in 2012 has written several books and demonstrated the use of scratchboard mainly using cross hatching techniques using X-acto11 scalpel. While other artists are still exploring the use of newer tools, tattoo needles (Hedges, 2016) have become a useful tool for portrait artists. Although the same technique of cross hatching has been used on the entire surface to create an artwork, very few artists have used variety of techniques on the same piece of art to bring out various textures to display the complexity and innovativeness in their techniques. A classic example of performing art *Bharatanatyam* has been used to display various scratchboard techniques to achieve the sheen on the attire, texture of skin, scratching for metal surfaces and to bring out the expression of "devotion". The purpose of scratchboard art "Devotion" is not only to depict the 'performing art' as a 'fine art' but to emphasize the use of various techniques apart from cross hatching to effectively depict realism and dexterities using the medium of scratchboard. The current study revolves around the conservation of the ancient art and reintroducing it to the community and disseminate these classic forms of visual art and fine art for implication towards better quality of life and social advancement.

2. Methodology

The subject was chosen after reviewing several photographs of *bharatanatyam* dance postures and based on the expression and message best conveyed to the audience. Since this posture of the dancer was symbolic of peace, humility and devotion this photograph was chosen for the study.

The dancer was analyzed based on experience, background exposure to performances to qualitatively suggest as one among the best representation of *bharatanatyam* dancer and '*mudra of namaste*' or a gesture of prayer pose. The photograph was cropped and then suitably adjusted using Adobe Photoshop 13.1.3 using grey scale to a point where only the required features and elements of the dancer is amplified and best expressed for purpose of a scratchboard art.

Ampersand Scratchboard of size 16x20" was used to make the art "Devotion". The entire study of the artwork "Devotion" was carried out using tattoo needle and X-Acto11 scalpel (Fig. 1). The X-Acto 11 scalpel has been used to carefully scrape off and not scratched or etched to release the Indian ink off the scraper board by holding the scalpel almost horizontal to the board. This technique was used for making the jasmine flowers and the ornaments/jewellery. Although several artists have been following the classic technique of cross hatching (Lee, 2012) or stippling, it is very necessary to use innovative techniques that

can bring out the effect and textures closest to its natural appearance. In-order to achieve that ‘near-hyperrealism’ on scratchboard art, various techniques like ‘scraping’ technique using the X-acto11 by holding the scalpel at 20° or almost horizontal to the board to make the jewellery and tortuous movement of the knife work along with scraping for the silk embroidery of saree and cross hatching with tattoo needles for skin were innovatively used in this artwork.

Figure 1 showing the tattoo needle on a holder (left) and X-acto 11 scalpel (right) (A) and the enlarge image showing head of the needle and scalpel blade in (B)



Figure 1: Tools used for making the scratchboard art “Devotion”.

3. Results

Scratchboard techniques used in the artwork “Devotion” and the importance of each *Bharatanatyam* feature.

3.1 Abhinaya and Bhava or an emotional state of intense devotion

The facial expressions of *Bharatanatyam* are called *abhinaya*. The dancer uses facial expressions to show emotions. The emotions may come from the poetry in the music, or belong to a character being portrayed. The expressive aspect of this visual art is for the dancer to communicate an inner experience to the audience. The emotions shown by the dancer create a response in the audience, an experience of feeling or sentiment. In *Bharatanatyam*, there are nine emotions and here she is expressing the *shanta bhava* (Sanskrit) (meaning feeling of peace) as her dominant emotion. A feeling of control and perfect equilibrium, synchronize every part of the facial muscle. The portrayal of feelings in *abhinaya* is stylized rather than literal as summarized by Nandikesvara in *Mirror of Gesture* " (or *Abhinaya Darpana* in sanskrit) during the 2nd century AD (Coomaraswamy and Duggirala, 1917). The special makeup for the dance and that exemplifies the unique features as seen in the above figure. Thick lines are drawn around the eyes, extending outwards past the eyes and the eyebrows are darkened. This makeup accentuates the movements of the eyes and expression. She also wears the *Urdhva Pundra tilak* on center of her forehead which signifies her dance to the Vaishnava deity (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Abhinaya and Bhava or an emotional state of intense devotion. The scratchboard technique of cross hatching has been used for the facial skin using tattoo needles.

3.2 Namaskaram/Namaste and prayer

The dancer poses with her hands together at the heart charka, close the eyes while the head faces upwards trying to reach the god for blessings with the *mudra* of *Namaskaram* or *Namaste* (I bow to you). This pose is the first in the sequence known as ‘*alarippu* of *Bharatanatyam*’ that signifies ritual dance prelude to the performance. Its primary intention is to invoke the blessings of the divine and to offer respect to the audience. It sanctifies the body of the dancer and the performance space creating a spiritual aura to the performer and the audience. The scratchboard art shows her decorated fingers that have the taint from henna or sometimes ink. Tattoo needles have been used for the skin while the faint scraping for the finger nails is with the X-acto 11 scalpel (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Showing the ‘*mudra*’ or ‘*hastas*’ - hand gestures. Note the red dye (sometimes henna) covering the finger tips and nails.

3.3 Costume- Silk saree exclusive for the dancer

The costume of the dancer is mainly a dhoti drape or piece of fabric tied around the waist and extending to cover most of the legs. This fabric is made of brocade silk made of silver fiber/thread that has a coating of gold. In between the dhoti are the pleats that run from the waist below while the upper part is the bodice (Fig 4A) and the loose pleated end on the shoulder if the saree pallav that has the embroidered brocade (Fig.4B). The style has been passed on from generations and sometimes it becomes heirloom to the family.

3.4 Exclusive temple jewellery and jasmine flower clad hair

The head piece ornament are made in such a manner that it emphasizes on the forehead and hair parting while on either side of the hair is an ornament symbolic of sun (Fig. 5B) and the moon. The ornaments were not scratched but was scraped from the ampersand scratchboard carefully. The dancer also wears pendants fixed along her ear lobe, so that she is not distracted by the loud noise from the instrumnets played as a backdrop. A heavy long necklace with a pendent by the chest is worn to regulate the brath of the dancer during intense movements and the jasmine clad hair adds beauty to the dancer and fragrance that keeps the dancer stress free during high activity (Fig. 5).

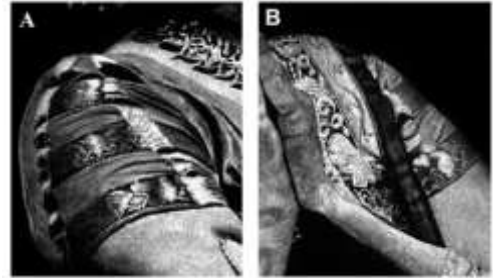


Figure 4: The traditional dress is an elaborate silk costume with temple jewellery which is normally passed down through generations. The red and gold silk garments are draped in an intricate geometrically-unique layer. Note the etching on the saree borders of t

4. Discussion

Bharatanatyam is a form of 'Natya yoga', a sacred and meditative dance yoga is believed to have similar health benefits as yoga. As a dancer, she understands the nature of divine knowledge, divine dance of energy and seeking god in entire universe and cosmic consciousness. The 'Divine dance of energy' in the universe is therefore graphically and beautifully represented in bharatanatyam, purifying the performer and the engrossed viewer.

Consequently, this form of dance which is also an evolutionary science for the spiritual evolution of human beings, falls into the category of "Bhakthi Yoga" (devotional yoga). A renowned dancer Dr. Vasundhara Doraswamy who has been practicing Bharatanatyam for the past 40 years believes that her yoga and bharatanatyam complement each other since it involves lot of breathing exercises. It has been further contended that Bharatanatyam is a movement in space that represent the mandalas (mystic shapes and forms) or the energy centers/chakras of the body represented in yoga (Balayogi and Devasena, 2010). Ultimately, bharatanatyam and yoga provide similar health benefits and a wellness choice for the performer who dissipates the divine energy to the surroundings.



Figure 5: The gold ornaments and precious gems line the hair, ears, neck, arms and waist. Bharatnatyam dancers wear a unique set of jewellery known as "Temple jewellery" during the performance. 'Armlets' (A), 'wristlets' or 'bangles', 'earrings' and 'necklaces'

This is the first report of a scratchboard art showing various techniques in the same art work to depict a performing art, Bharatanatyam. Although both these art form are ancient, as a fine art medium, scratchboard is yet to gain popularity among the fine art professionals. One of rate limiting factor is that it involves excess time and patience that puts the artist to a meditative mode. Be it performing art or a

visual art, art itself serves as a therapy and provides immense benefits to the artist himself and to the audience by improving the quality of life.

This form of performing art denotes and captures emotions, which is transcribed as a scratchboard art (Fig. 6). The current study therefore demonstrates the use of various techniques and methods to bring the near-realism effect using sharp tools on a scratchboard that provides a 3-dimensional effect, an attribute of this unique medium, scratchboard. The study therefore is an attempt to conserve and disseminate these classic forms of visual art and fine art and scratchboard serves as one of the finest mediums for the artists to explore.

5. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that the performing art Bharatanatyam which has several cultural, health and social benefits can be also perpetuated using unique techniques on a scratchboard to bring out realism and conserve the medium of visual arts.

Conflict of Interests

The author does not have any conflict of interests.

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Figure 6: Scratchboard art - "Devotion" In this image is Bharatanatyam dancer Ms. Lakshmi Sriraman of the Shree school of Dance, Kentucky. Using X-Acto11 scalpel and tattoo needle and Ampersand Scratchboard size 16x20" (without frame) and 20x24 (with frame)